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Defining Detection: The Detective Genre

This chapter frames the analysis of the American television detective drama through genre. It will first give an outline of the relationship between the crime genre and the detective genre, and will then move on to discuss two of the detective genre’s sub-genres: the ‘genius’ detective genre and the police procedural. In the course of outlining and defining the genre, this chapter will also sketch out an understanding of genre as discourse, following the work of Jason Mittell (2004). The discussion of how the genre is understood here serves several purposes. First, the different ways in which the detective genre has been debated in relation to various media makes it necessary to offer a clear terminology for this discussion. Furthermore, as this chapter will show, the definition of the detective genre is complicated by the sub-genre’s relationship with the crime genre. The crime genre describes all texts that feature crime as a dominant part of the narrative (the gangster genre, the serial killer genre, the cop drama, the heist film, the courtroom drama, etc.). It is treated here as an umbrella term or umbrella genre that accommodates a number of sub-genres, as will be discussed in more detail later on. Second, with a prolific genre like the detective genre, which is not exclusive to one media form, it becomes relevant to discuss similarities and differences between versions on television and other media in its aesthetics and narrative structures. These formal aspects and the television genre’s links to the literary genre are discussed throughout this study, but need to be underpinned by clear definitions.

To briefly define the detective genre, it is understood here as a sub-genre of the crime genre. As self-explanatory as the term ‘crime genre’ seems, there is some confusion over what actually constitutes it. Most approaches to the genre, whether in literature, film or television studies, work with very vague definitions. A common denominator
is that a serious crime (or the appearance of one) lies at the centre of the narrative. This inclusive approach to genre has its advantages: it acknowledges the fluidity of any genre definition and can easily deal with generic hybrids like *Analyze This* (dir. Ramis 1999), which is a gangster film as well as a comedy. But the stories of crime can be told from various angles: *The Godfather* (dir. Coppola 1972) or *L.A. Confidential* (dir. Hanson 1997) are not films about ‘a crime’, but tell stories of criminal conspiracies, with the earlier film telling the story from the perspective of the criminal(s). A film like *Philadelphia* (dir. Demme 1993) deals with the issue of whether a crime has been committed, and parts of the film deal with the investigation of this crime. But the crime is wrongful termination – a serious crime, indeed, but rarely the stuff of crime stories – and the emphasis of the film is on melodrama. Films like *Lethal Weapon* (dir. Donner 1987) or *Tango and Cash* (dir. Konchalovskiy 1989) have the investigation of crimes at their centre, but narrative structures, point of view and the moments of ‘spectacle’ are different from those in the other texts. These examples are all from film, but the crime genre becomes even broader with the inclusion of novels ranging from *Cop Hater* (McBain 1956) to *The Firm* (Grisham 1991) or *The Judge and His Hangman* (Dürrenmatt 1951), or television dramas ranging from *Murder, She Wrote* to *The Shield* to more melodramatic series like *Judging Amy* (CBS, 1999–2005). The term ‘crime genre’ is also often used synonymously with its many sub-genres. For example, in an article on *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (CBS, 2000–), Nichola Dobson summarises the crime genre as follows:

I would suggest that dominant features of crime television include the following: (i) the commission of a crime and action surrounding it, often of a violent and dangerous nature; (ii) a crime solving process entailing arrests, the questioning of witnesses and suspects, examining, chasing, prosecuting; (iii) a narrative space – police station, detective’s office, court, city; (iv) the characterization of heroic cop/detective, clever sidekick, officious superior; and (v) a resolution/outcome of the justice system.

(Dobson 2009: 77)

Dobson’s definition feels more like a definition of the police procedural, using *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* as central (and possibly defining) text. Her definition emphasises institutional context, thus excluding private detectives like Sam Spade or Hercule Poirot or television texts like *Simon & Simon* (CBS, 1981–9) or *Diagnosis Murder* (CBS, 1993–2001).